

SUJAY KUMAR SHAH



50 UNDER 50
YOUNG AND ASPIRING INDO-CANADIANS

Shah CANADA™

He's been leading his organization to create history. And his formula seems easy to interpret, difficult to apply: holding past achievements dear and learning from them to evolve to new benchmarks. Trailblazing business excellence, he has created a whole new world in his organization by balancing two very different worlds that he belongs to, India and Canada. What makes him the best, he's open to share!



PRESIDENT & CEO
Shah Canada Group of Companies

TORONTO, ONTARIO

SENSEI OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Number of Employees:
200

Platinum Status
Winner of Canada's Best Managed Companies (2019)

SUJAY KUMAR SHAH

Entrepreneur



He has grown up in an environment that promotes success and business. His grandparents were the first ones to migrate out of India to Kenya and gradually were able to establish a textile business. His father, Shashi, migrated to Canada, where Sujay, Ajay and Rajay were born. Shashi gave wings to their entrepreneurial spirit and started Shah Trading Company in 1974. Being the first Indian grocery wholesaler in Canada and steered by the trademark Gujarati business acumen, they catapulted to the top, dominating the Canadian market.

Sujay and his two brothers, Rajay and Ajay, together with their cousins Sanjeev and Kamal, embraced the world of business as an integral part of their lives. They learned the ropes during summers and holidays. The dream was simple, to ensure that they as the next generation would continue to build on the family legacy.

Sujay, who earned his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, joined the business in 1998 when he was just 23. He says that working with one's family is a unique and fulfilling experience "because nobody will be as committed to you and the business as you and your family". The support would encourage him and Sanjeev to take the company forward by successfully expanding into the U.S.

Forging a new path

In 2005, Shashi established his independent venture, Shashi Foods, which became the building block for what would eventually become the Shah Canada Group of Companies. Founded in 2006 by Sujay and his late brother Ajay, Shah Canada is today one of the Best Managed Companies of Canada maintaining its Platinum level status. With Rajay, the Vice President, the company's success lies in its unique forward-thinking philosophy that honours its past and the rich Indian values. The exhaustive portfolio includes brands such as Smile Natural Foods, Shashi Foods, New York Spice, Jay Capital Management, and Clarius.

In 2010, Sujay oversaw the launch of Kii Naturals, by creating an artisanal cracker, that incorporated flavorful fruits, nuts and seeds, making it a gourmet accompaniment and in just seven years, the company shipped to over 25 countries. In 2017, it was sold to a U.S. private equity firm at a record valuation.

At 42, he almost retired. But the thought that his three children, Jayen Kumar, Aryah and Dylen, would miss out on the important experience of seeing their father build a successful business stopped him from doing so. Instead, he took a two-week break in Barbados and came back to start Smile Natural Foods. "I am a serial entrepreneur, who loves starting companies and seeing them grow. In fact, every time I tell my wife, Gina, that this will be my last venture, she laughs and refuses to believe me. She knows me very well."

Indian values of doing business

What makes Sujay such a good entrepreneur is not just his sharp business acumen but also his



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deeply ingrained religious values. One of the core principles of Jainism is Ahimsa (non-violence) and he applies it to everyone he meets – customers, suppliers, staff, friends, shops he visits, any one – with equal respect. It is a valuable lesson that was passed down to him by his father.

Sujay's prosperous career as an entrepreneur has earned him numerous accolades, including Fellowship by Richard Ivey Business School's QuantumShift Program in 2015 and was recognized as Male Entrepreneur of the Year by the Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce in 2013.

Despite his success, he enjoys spending his time with his family and close circle of friends. "Who can I be if not my family. Gina and I have been married for 20 years now. We have three lovely children and life with them is a bliss. For me, an ideal day would be on a beach with them four."

Q&A

How should success be measured?
By the level of one's happiness.

For me, success is achieving a sense of fulfillment and contentment in four aspects of my life – family, business health, and spirituality. On a scale of 1 to 10, I am 12 because I am satisfied with where I am in my life. Yeah, happiness is the ultimate indicator of success.

What's your view of India from the outside?
A massive country with a population of more than 1.4 billion people, India is making smart moves in industries by developing submarkets and making strategic acquisitions around the world. I also think India's greatest export is its people. As immigrants, Indians create vibrant communities, community centers and hyper-educate their children. They take a very inclusive approach by getting involved in all levels of society, businesses, government and the economy of the country they are in. I'd say they are an asset to their country and global citizens.

What's your suggestion for a fast-paced growth in your field?
To begin with, innovation is key. You need to find a hyper-niche and capitalize on it as quickly and aggressively as possible. Then ride it as long as you can, but don't hang your hat on it. Eventually, the growth will slow down, and the valuation will change. So, find the niche, invest in hyper-growth, and then exit at the right time to achieve fast-paced growth."

A career failure you experienced?
It was not a failure as such but a setback. When we acquired the defunct bakery, MJ's Fine Foods and launched Kii Naturals, we didn't know anything about baking, and the company was losing a lot of money.

I was riddled with a lot of self-doubt but I was lucky to have the wise counsel of my father, who reminded me that all it took was fundamentals of business to turn a company around. I took my

He ensures following his passion too by practicing the traditional Japanese martial art of karate. “Karate keeps me physically and mentally fit, as it’s like yoga and very spiritual. I have been doing it since childhood and now kids too have joined me. During the pandemic, I also started meditating.” He is involved in supporting the building of a Dojo (Japanese term for karate school) in Guyana as part of his philanthropic efforts. He says, “Martial arts has played a significant role in my childhood, and I want to help provide the same opportunity for young people in Guyana, who sometimes can get caught in the cycle of crime, which I want to break.” Once the school opens this year, he supports the opening of another one in Kenya.

Gichin Funakoshi, father of modern karate, said, “The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory nor defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants.”

The 48-year-old Sujay embodies the very zen-like essence of karate that goes beyond just physical prowess and speaks to not just cultivating one’s character but also becoming a better human being. To sum it up in Sujay’s words, “By practicing karate and meditation, I show up as the best boss, father, husband and person I can be.”


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1 Guiding his children to win at the Karate World Cup, 2018
2 Shah brothers working at the head office
3 His impressive 120 ft. custom build masterpiece
4 The Shah brothers in one frame
5 His whole world
6 With their inspiration, their father

father’s advice, and we soon became one of the fastest-growing, most profitable businesses in the natural food industry in Canada.

What is the most rewarding part of your career?
It has been maintaining, growing and fostering my family legacy and culture, while providing myself with the freedom and flexibility in my day-to-day life.

Proudest moment?
There is no single moment. Every day, I have the privilege of watching my children grow up. Seeing them prepare for school in the morning to practicing karate with them, or simply having breakfast as a family. These moments are priceless. My wife and I together instill in them the values of our family and that is truly amazing and special.”

The Canadian and/or Indian factor in your success?
My DNA is Indian, my business tactics are East African Indian and my education is Canadian. In every way, shape and form, that’s who I am. Today, I am a proud Indo-Canadian with family heritage rooted in East Africa and India.”

What makes you YOU?
My family and my dedication to them, my business and myself.



If Sujay had not been a serial entrepreneur, he says, he’d have been a hip-hop or rap artist. We think he’d make a ‘fly’ one’ fo’shizzle’ …